

The Halfcastes of the Furneaux Group

By

A. L. MESTON

At the eastern end of Bass Strait on the Furneaux Group of Islands there lives a small segregated colony of people of mixed blood termed halfcastes, although none can actually claim so close a relationship to a black parent. These halfcastes are the descendants of sealers, both white and coloured, and aboriginal women from Tasmania and the mainland of Australia.

In the opening years of the nineteenth century the islands in Bass Strait were the happy hunting grounds of sealers, and such was the fame of the region that sealers from as far afield as Mauritius and New England came to share in the rich harvest.

It was the practice of merchants of Hobart and Sydney to send gangs of sealers to live on the islands, providing them with some provisions, but expecting them in the main to subsist on the flesh of kangaroo, wombat, and emu. In addition to these, there were others, many of them escaped convicts, who, having gained possession of a first-class whaleboat, ranged from island to island living on what they could catch or steal, and often in the manner of pirates waylaying ships and levying tribute, or robbing isolated settlers. Their sealskins, kangaroo skins, and the like were taken by passing vessels in exchange for slop clothing and rum.

The Tasmanian headquarters of these freebooters towards the close of the second decade of the nineteenth century was Gun Carriage or Vansittart Island. Many had living with them as wives and servants native women obtained from Tasmania or the mainland of Australia, either by force or persuasion. Captain James Kelly, who was engaged in the sealing industry in its hey-day, tells us that 'the custom of the sealers in the Straits was that every man should have from two to five of those native women for their own use and benefit to select any of them they thought proper to cohabit with as their wives'. His statement is amply corroborated by official documents and current newspapers.

George Briggs, for example, one of the four men who accompanied this same James Kelly in an open whaleboat on a voyage round Tasmania, was a sealer, and had left on the islands two wives, one of them a native Tasmanian, and five children. In 1827 Major Lockyer at King George's Sound, Western Australia, seized two open whaleboats owned by merchants of Hobart Town. The composition of the crews, typical of such sealing gangs, is illustrative. In one boat were four white men, an Australian aboriginal male, and Mooney, a native woman of Van Diemen's Land; in the other four whites and two native women, one from the mainland of Australia, the other, Dinah, from Van Diemen's Land. The steersman of one boat was James Everett, a surname which has survived among the halfcastes of the Furneaux Group to this day. Occasionally we find Maoris among the crews, and oftentimes natives from the vicinity of Sydney. David Howie, an old sealer who made his home on King Island, always had black women as part of his establishment. One of them, who went by the name of Marian Scott, served him for 30 years, but eventually found her way to the Furneaux Group where she lived with the halfcastes John Smith and his wife and young family.

By 1827 the sealing industry had so seriously declined that Arthur reported to Bathurst that 'many of the rocks and islands which once afforded a rich annual harvest are now entirely deserted'. The decline continued, and in 1832 it was estimated that the average amount earned by sealers in the Straits was as little as £15 a year.

The industry was practically dead, and most of the sealers went elsewhere or sought other employment, but some, from love of a free life of perilous enterprise and wild adventure, remained on the islands lying between Flinders Island and the mainland of Tasmania. Here they built cottages, grew vegetables, ran goats, and added to their income by exporting the eggs, fat, oil, and feathers of the mutton bird. Oddly enough the flesh of the mutton bird—now when salted the staple export—was little used, except for home consumption. An idea of the extent of their operations may be gathered from Backhouse's statement of 1832 that in one season $2\frac{1}{2}$ tons of feathers were exported. This meant a catch of 112,000 birds.

In 1831 Gun Carriage Island was chosen as the home for the Tasmanian aborigines, and Robinson was directed to occupy it. The sealers who were in occupation were harshly and summarily ejected, and compelled to find new homes in the nearby islands. In addition, Robinson, armed with the requisite authority, cruised about and forced the sealers to surrender all the native women he could find in their possession.

On Preservation Island lived James Munro, a sealer who had gained so considerable a measure of authority over his fellows that he was regarded as their leader. To him they referred their problems, from him they sought a decision in their disputes. Faced with the loss of their women, the sealers in their hour of need turned to Munro. He approached Robinson with a plan to assist in catching the blacks left at large in Tasmania, pointing out that the sealers knew the coast and the haunts of the tribes, none better, and that, when the blacks were taken, the sealers could readily supply boats to carry them to their island home. The price of such assistance was the right to retain the black women they had. Although he soon repented of the alliance, Robinson was won over by the old tactician, and some of the sealers, at least, were enabled to retain their women. While a number of the women wished to escape from what was little better than slavery, many preferred to remain with the sealers rather than endure the empty, unnatural existence that awaited them at Robinson's settlement.

Three of Munro's many wives were pure-blooded Tasmanians. One of them, Jumbo by name, was living with him when James Backhouse visited the islands in 1832. Another of his wives was a Tahitian and, by repute, a beautiful woman. With Munro, also, was a Tahitian male. The story ran that Munro and a white companion, John Snailhouse, were unaccounted members of the crew of the *Bounty*. Both men, like many others who either exiled themselves or sought sanctuary on the Furneaux Group, had assumed the names they were known by, but, since every man on the *Bounty* can be accounted for, we can be quite sure they were not on that vessel. Usually, however, there is something behind such a tradition, and they could well have been members of the crew of the whaler *Matilda* wrecked on Osnaburg, one of the Society Islands, in 1792. When Bligh entered Matavai Bay on his second voyage with two ships, the *Providence* and the *Assistant*, he was surprised by a whaleboat pulling towards him. Its occupants proved to be the twenty-one survivors of the *Matilda* who had found their way to Tahiti. When he set sail on return, sixteen of these men accepted passages home, but five preferred to remain, or, as Bligh would have it, 'deserted'. It is quite possible that Munro and Snailhouse were two of the five deserters. Whatever their story, the islands agreed with them, and each lived to a ripe old age, Munro dying at 80, Snailhouse at 99. Bonwick errone-

ously credits Munro with having a halfcaste family, but neither he nor Snailhouse left any descendants. Duncan and Parish were two other prominent sealers who left no halfcaste children.

On Preservation Island lived two other sealers, Robert Rhew, or Rew as it is sometimes spelt, and John Dobson. The latter came to the Straits in 1819, a man of about sixty, and lived on until he was 104; the former ended his days an old man of 96 at the Invalid Depot, Launceston. Even as late as 1854, Rhew roamed the length and breadth of Bass Strait, and in that year lived for a time with a halfcaste wife on Hunter Island at the western end of the Strait.

Tom Mansell from Sydney, and on that account usually styled Sydney Tom, married Judy, a pure-blooded Tasmanian aboriginal of the Oyster Bay Tribe, but there was no issue. By a later union with a negress he had a son from whom all the many Mansells of to-day are descended.

Judy, Sydney Tom's first wife, declared that, as a young girl, she had often seen George Meredith, the pioneer settler of the Oyster Bay district. And well she might, for he took an active part in whaling and sealing. His boats ranged along the east coast of Tasmania, visited the islands and shores of Bass Strait, and journeyed as far westward as Kangaroo Island. On one voyage, Meredith kidnapped a black woman and her daughter on the South Australian coast, and brought them to the Furneaux Group. The daughter, Mary, became the wife of George Everett, by whom he had four children, three daughters and a son.

Another of Everett's wives by whom there were several children was Betty, the daughter of Mattai, a pure-blooded Maori, and Wapperty, a Tasmanian woman from the Ben Lomond tribe, whose photograph appears in Bonwick. Wapperty later became the wife of Robert Rhew, who soon tired of her, however, and took her to the settlement on Flinders Island where he handed her over to the care of the Government.

Most of the small islands were occupied. The Everetts, for example, lived on Woody Island; the Armstrongs, the wife not a Tasmanian, on Badger Island; and John Lee, whose wife was also not a Tasmanian, on Big Dog Island.

In marked contrast with Everett, who could neither read nor write, was Richard Maynard. He came of a good English family and had been educated at an English university, but he fell foul of the law and was transported to Van Diemen's Land. Seizing the first opportunity, he escaped to the bush where he was adopted by the Ben Lomond tribe, and married the daughter of the chief, Limina Bungana, or Manalagana, as he is better known. Maynard soon realised the doom that awaited the natives and, not wishing to share in it, resolved to seek sanctuary in the Furneaux Islands. Abandoning his real name of Bushby and bestowing on his wife the name Margaret, he made his way to Long Island where he built himself a decent cottage and made his home. Of this marriage there were two children, a son and a daughter. The son John had a large family, and the daughter Mary became the wife of John Barwood who, to hide his identity, assumed the name of Smith. From this union all the Smiths are derived. Maynard later married an aboriginal woman from Victoria and had nine children by her.

Robinson, finding Gun Carriage Island quite unsuitable as a home for the surviving Tasmanians, soon abandoned it to the sealers. To this island returned, among others, Thomas Tucker, the most daring and active of the sealers. A man of good education, he once held a commission in the Royal Navy. He had a Hindoo wife, and was interested in the halfcaste children to such an extent that whenever the opportunity offered he voluntarily spent some time in educating them. His neat cottage was picturesquely situated on a cliff overlooking the sea.

An interesting old sealer was James Herbert Beadon, Beedon, Beeton, or Beaton, as the name is variously spelt. He belonged to a London family of goldsmiths and jewellers. Of Jewish descent, his real name was Isaacs. He came to Van Diemen's Land in 1827, and in the early part of his career spent some time among the islands at the western end of Bass Strait. From the district around Cape Grim he obtained his wife Emerinna or Nimerinna, a pure-blooded Tasmanian. Like so many of his associates he had taken refuge in the islands, but unlike them he was in regular receipt of a handsome allowance remitted through a prominent Launceston resident. Assuming the name Beadon he settled on Badger Island. The regular income enabled him to live in much greater comfort than the other islanders. He took a great interest in his halfcaste family and gave them some measure of education. Lucy Beadon, his daughter, was universally known and loved throughout the islands. Bishop Nixon who paid a brief visit to the island group in 1854 wrote of her as the 'greatest lady' it had ever been his good fortune to encounter. 'A noble-looking half-caste of some twenty-five years of age, (she) bears the burden of twenty-three stone' he wrote. 'Good-humoured and kind-hearted, she is everyone's friend upon the island . . . From the pure love of those around her, she daily gathers together the children of the sealers, and does her best to impart to them the rudiments both of secular and religious knowledge'. In 1872 she wrote to Truganini offering her a home among people of her own race, and at the same time unsuccessfully approached the Government to allow the transfer.

Lucy never married. A capable business woman, she was the only halfcaste who could successfully contend with Launceston merchants in commercial transactions. In her time boats from the islands never came singly to Launceston, but in a fleet. She always sailed with the fleet and was regarded by her fellow islanders as the commodore. She set the course, she decided the hour of sailing. Old Beadon had three other children, a daughter Jane and two sons, James and Henry, all of whom married Everetts.

Those who bear the surname Thomas are derived from a pilot well known on the Tamar when Launceston was but an infant settlement. The legend runs that John Thomas was, for his services as a pilot, granted in addition to his salary a square mile of ground where Inveresk now stands, but that he sold it for a few bottles of rum, and retired to live with the blacks at Cape Portland. Essentially true as this story is there has been a straying from fact. John Thomas was engaged as harbourmaster at Port Dalrymple in the early days of the settlement on the Tamar at an annual salary of £50. In 1813 he was granted a location order of 40 acres on the western bank of that river but not so close to Launceston as Inveresk. The existing Newnham Hall stands almost in the centre of his land which extended along that river front for approximately 14 chains. The nature of the misdemeanour which caused him to seek refuge at Cape Portland, and the amount of rum received in exchange for the forty acres we do not know. Rum was by no means an unusual medium of exchange in either New South Wales or Van Diemen's Land before 1820, and even Governor Macquarie had recourse to it. He paid 400 gallons to contractors for building part of George St., Sydney, and the contractors of the Sydney Hospital were paid with a monopoly over the importation of rum for three years. Thomas lived for some time with the natives at Cape Portland and married a native woman. From Cape Portland he moved with his family to Clarke Island, where, we learn from Joseph Milligan, he was living in 1844. At his death he was, in accordance with his wish, buried at Cape Portland. His halfcaste children, moreover, migrated to the islands further north, one of whom, his son Phil, was well known in Launceston where he regularly appeared in his own little craft with produce from the islands.

As a result of the efforts of Tucker, Beadon, Maynard and others the English spoken by the halfcastes was correct and the tone pleasing, but frequent visits to Launceston and close contact with the uneducated classes of that city soon corrupted the syntax and debased the tone. Such visits, too, gave the islanders an opportunity to indulge freely in drink, a practice which unfortunately almost all readily gave way to, and the coming of the island fleet to Launceston was little better than a drunken orgy.

The lure of gold was just as powerful in the Furneaux Islands as elsewhere. In 1852, many left to try their fortunes on the Victorian goldfields, and of those who actually reached the fields none returned. The islands were thus robbed of the majority of their energetic progressive people.

In the late seventies of last century there was a fresh infusion of white blood when George Henry Burgess, a mariner, John Summers, a mutton birder, and William Richard Brown, a boat builder, married halfcastes and settled on Cape Barren Island.

From what has been written it will be apparent that the halfcastes are of mixed origin, and this has been accentuated still further in recent years by the introduction of a Mongolian strain. So closely have they intermarried, however, that all without exception can lay claim to Tasmanian descent. In appearance they range over the various races from which they are derived, and it is not uncommon to find a pair of blue eyes looking out from a face in form and colour quite aboriginal. In others, European features are associated with a dark skin. Some are very close to the black race others to the white. The genealogical table below shows how mixed the families had become even by the third generation.

James Herbert Beadon (Isaaes)	}	Henry Beadon	}	son	}	Ernestine Beadon
Emerinna of N.W. Tasm.						
George Everett	}	daughter	}			
Mary of S. Aust.						
John Thomas (a Welshman)	}	Phil Thomas	}	Judith Thomas		
Judith of N.E. Tasm.						
Bligh (an Irishman)	}	Eliza Bligh	}			
Polly (halfcaste daughter of native of Western Port)						

(Bligh, a late comer to the islands in 1851, went to the Victorian gold diggings and never returned, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves.)

The widespread intimacy of sealers and native women in the early days of the colony did not produce a numerous race. Although the Tasmanian black women were passionately fond of children of their own blood, as a rule they detested those they bore to white men and frequently practised infanticide. In his report of 1831 Robinson affirms that whenever the opportunity offered they destroyed such children, and gives definite examples in proof of his statement.

In 1866 there were 66 children scattered over the various islands; in 1872 the total number of halfcastes was 84, 32 adults and 52 children; in 1908 the total population in the islands was under 250; and to-day it approximates but 120. This decrease is in great measure owing to a recent tendency of these folk to disperse themselves among the general populace, a tendency which is generally favoured as the best solution to the problem of developing their latent powers and giving them full opportunity as citizens.

By 1908 only four full halfcaste Tasmanian were living in the Furneaux Group—John Maynard, Harry Beadon, Philip Thomas and Nancy Mansell, all of whom were between 70 and 80 years of age, and of these Nancy Mansell, the second wife of Sydney Tom, was born a Thomas.

The halfcastes had no legal right to the islands they occupied or birded on, and the leasing of them for grazing purposes, or the sale of freehold blocks with the subsequent stocking, began seriously to interfere with their living, for the islanders were largely dependent on mutton birds for their very existence. In Captain Malcolm Laing Smith they found a staunch friend. Smith, who had served in the 83rd Regiment before coming to Tasmania in 1826, leased and occupied Flinders Island when it was abandoned as the home of the Tasmanian race. With some grown-up sons and some servants, male and female, he attempted to develop his vast estate of 513,000 acres. Early in 1868 he appealed to the Government to reserve Chappell Island entirely for the use of halfcastes. He pointed out that it was eminently suited for such purpose being centrally situated and a vast rookery of mutton birds. Later in the same year he recommended that Passage Island be also reserved for them. In reply he was informed that all the islands in the Strait would be withheld from further sale, but that two freehold blocks had been purchased on Chappell Island and the purchasers could not legally be got rid of. This was something, but far from satisfactory. In 1881, 6000 acres of land on the south end of Cape Barren Island were withdrawn from sale or lease and set up as a reserve for halfcastes. It is upon this reserve that most of the halfcastes now reside. In 1891 Chappell, Babel and Little Green Islands were reserved for mutton birding, but on each there were freehold blocks, and grazing leases continued to be held, with consequent destruction of mutton bird burrows and decrease of birds.

It is interesting to note that in Smith's day comparatively few birds were salted for market, eggs, oil, and feathers being the main concern. In 1864 no fewer than 3,000,000 eggs were gathered on Chappell Island alone. By 1900 salted birds constituted the bulk of the industry and since 1908 the annual number marketed has been in the vicinity, sometimes more, sometimes less, of 800,000 birds.

In recent years the State has more fully acknowledged its responsibility to these semi-primitive people. An Act of Parliament of 1912 did much to safeguard their interests and endeavoured, by subdividing the Reserve into homestead and agricultural blocks, to give them a more settled existence and provide them with permanent homes. This Act was replaced in 1945 by another more generous and sympathetic.

REFERENCES

- Acts Parliament Tasm.*, 3 George V, 16 and 9 George VI, 14.
 ARTHUR-BATHURST, 24 March 1827. *Hist. Rec. Aust.*, (3), 5, p. 700.
 BACKHOUSE, JAMES, 1843.—*A narrative of a visit to the Australian Colonies.* (London.)
 BLADON, JAMES MILES.—Observations on halfcastes during a residence of 18 years, 1911-1928. *m.s.*
 BROWNRIGG, CANON M. B., 1872.—*The cruise of the Freak.* (Launceston.)
 KELLY, JAMES.—First discovery of Port Davey and Macquarie Harbour. *Pap. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, for 1920, pp. 160-181.
 LOCKYER, MAJOR.—Journal of. *Hist. Rec. Aust.*, (3), 6, pp. 460-487.
 LORD, J. E. C.—Furneaux Islands. *Papers Parliament Tasm.*, 1908, no. 57.
 MACKANESS, G., 1931.—*The life of Vice-Admiral William Bligh*, 2 vols. (Sydney.)
 MACQUARIE-BATHURST, 28 April, 1814.—*Hist. Rec. Aust.*, (1), 8, p. 192.
 MILLIGAN, JOSEPH, 1846.—*Tasm. Journ.*, 2, p. 310.
 NIXON, BISHOP F. R., 1857.—*The cruise of the Beacon.* (London.)
 RIBBEY, THOMAS.—Halfcaste islanders in Bass's Straits. *Papers Legislative Council Tasm.*, 1863, no. 48.
 ROBINSON, G. A.—Report, 13 May, 1831.
 STEPHENS, EDWARD WILLIAM.—The Furneaux Islands, their early settlement and some characteristics of their inhabitants. *m.s.*
 WALKER, G. W., 1862.—*Life and labours of G. W. Walker.* (London.)
 H. H. Pimblett, Government Printer, Tasmania.